

"FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT"
JOHN 3:1-17
THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT - YEAR A
MARCH 1, 2026

INTRODUCTION: THE THINGS WE HIDE

In 2020 researchers at Washington University in St. Louis wanted to measure something that some of us feel, but perhaps don't talk about.

They wanted to know: **how many Americans are hiding what they really think from the people around them?**

What they found was striking.

Roughly four in ten Americans - **nearly half** - said they do not feel comfortable sharing their true views publicly.

And here is what is so interesting: it wasn't a fear of the **government** at the root of their silence.

It was fear of **how the people closest to them** - friends, family, neighbors, and coworkers - would react to their true views.

As the lead researcher put it, people worry that expressing their real selves "will isolate and alienate them from the people they know."¹

In other words, some of us are living with parts of ourselves tucked away in the dark ... **not** because we are in legal danger (yet) for sharing our views ... **but** we tuck parts of ourselves away in the dark because we are not sure how the people around us will respond if they see who we really are.

¹ James L. Gibson, "Free Speech? Nearly Half of Americans Self-Censor, Study Finds," Washington University in St. Louis, Arts & Sciences, 2020.
<https://artsci.washu.edu/ampersand/free-speech-nearly-half-americans-self-censor-study-finds>

I believe that, in this day and age, many of us are not really afraid of **God's judgment.**

But we are **very aware of each other's judgement.**

And in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus speaks words of God's love to a man who is also hiding parts of himself in the dark ...

BIBLICAL CONTEXT: THE MAN IN THE DARK

Today we meet Nicodemus, and he is not a struggling outsider.

He is a Pharisee and a highly educated religious leader and a member of the Sanhedrin. That was the high court of priests, scribes, and elders that judged religious and legal matters in Jerusalem

Nicodemus has credentials. Nicodemus has influence. Nicodemus has a lifetime of careful religious practice.

And he comes to Jesus ... **by night.**

Nicodemus is hiding.

Not from God. **But from his own community.**

In Jesus' time, a person's honor and public standing were everything.

If Nicodemus was seen in public with Jesus ... a controversial rabbi from Galilee .. this could have real consequences for him since he was a part of the respected ruling religious establishment.

So Nicodemus slips through the darkness to find Jesus.

And Jesus meets him there ... in the dark ... and does not condemn him for hiding.

Instead, Jesus offers Nicodemus something he doesn't expect.

Not a correction. Not a religious assignment.

Just the simple, stunning news that God's love does not depend on Nicodemus' performance, his credentials, or his ability to keep up appearances.

THE WORLD THAT JUDGES VS. THE GOD WHO SAVES

I think we live in a world that constantly evaluates us:

At work, where performance reviews remind us our value is always being assessed ...

On **social media**, where “likes” tell us how well we are doing ...

In the **classroom**, where grades and rankings remind us how well we are learning and communicating new information to the instructor ...

And in our own **heads**, where an inner voice might replay our worst moments and say, *“You should have done better.”*

I think moving from **darkness** to **light** begins with naming honestly this judgement we might feel.

Like Nicodemus, I don't think many of us are **hiding from God**.

However, we are **hiding from other people**.

We keep parts of ourselves in the shadows.

- Perhaps it's a doubt about a relationship we carry quietly ...
- A struggle we have not said out loud ...
- A fear about the future we have not admitted to anyone ...
- A part of our story we have decided others are better off not knowing ...
- A question about God we have been afraid to ask out loud ...

- A grief we are still carrying that we think we should be over by now ...
- A part of who we are that we have not yet named because naming it feels risky ...

But listen to what Jesus says to Nicodemus right in the middle of that darkness that he is hiding in ...

*"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with **everyone who is born of the Spirit.**"* (v. 8)

The Spirit does not wait for you to step out of the shadows first.

The Holy Spirit finds you there ... in the dark places ... without judgment.

Jesus does not **shame** Nicodemus for hiding parts of himself in the dark.

Jesus does not **lecture** him about his fear or the worry he might have about his reputation.

Jesus offers him the image of **wind** — free, unpredictable, uncontrollable — and Jesus says: **this is what the Spirit is like.**

You cannot control the wind. You cannot deny that it exists.

The Spirit simply moves ... and gives life where it chooses ... and Jesus says that new life is for Nicodemus.

And then Jesus says the words that change everything.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." (v. 16)

And then, **just one breath later**:

*"God did not send the Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but in order that the world might be **saved** through him."(v. 17)*

God does not **condemn** Nicodemus. God **finds** Nicodemus in the dark, where he is hiding. And calls him into the light of God's love and freedom and acceptance.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION: BRINGING WHAT'S HIDDEN INTO THE LIGHT

This week, **notice** something in your own life that you have been hiding in the dark.

Notice that part of yourself you keep hidden because you are not sure they would be welcomed in the light of your personal relationships.

- It might be a **doubt** you have carried for years.
- A **fear** about your future.
- A **part of your identity** you have not yet said out loud to someone you love.
- A **struggle** you have not named because naming it feels too risky.

Bring that hidden thing to God in prayer.

Remember that Jesus met Nicodemus in the dark and didn't offer him judgment — **but life**.

God can meet you exactly where you are, even in the parts of your life you keep most carefully in the shadows.

CONCLUSION: FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

The researchers at Washington University in St. Louis found that almost half of Americans are hiding what they really think from the people around them.

Some of us listening today are hiding parts of ourselves in the darkness.

But Nicodemus shows us something important: The darkness does not have to be a place where we need to hide.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, afraid that doing so in the light might cost him his job and his reputation and social standing.

And Jesus meets him there ... in the **dark** ... with words of light and life:

*"God did not send the Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."(v. 17)*

May Jesus meet you in the dark and hidden parts of your life this week with the light of his love and acceptance.

Gospel: John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to

you, 'You must be born from above.' 8The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." 9 Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" 10 Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

11 "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, yet you do not receive our testimony. 12 If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? 13 No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. 14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."